6.4: Addressing Challenging Behavior

Preschool children rely on guidance from their teachers to practice and eventually master the complex skills required to navigate social interactions with peers and adults. With guidance from caring adults in their environment, preschool children can develop a sense of competence, learn developmentally appropriate ways to socialize with peers, and resolve conflicts.[1]

Teacher’s Role

As the adults that work with children on a daily basis and who form positive relationships with them, teachers have a critical role in addressing challenging behaviors. Teachers should:

• Observe and identify the emotions underlying challenging behaviors.
• Gather input from colleagues, other program staff members, and families
• to gain a greater understanding of the function or purpose behind children’s challenging behaviors and to develop strategies—including self-reflection and peer-reflection—for addressing those behaviors.
• Share observations appropriately and respect confidentiality when discussions involve children and families.
• Implement strategies designed by colleagues, families, and other specialists to address children’s challenging behaviors.
• Develop, modify, and adapt schedules, routines, and the program environment to positively affect challenging behaviors.[2]

Program’s Role

Teachers also need support from their programs. Programs should:
• Provide support and professional development on the practices that are most likely to prevent challenging behaviors in young children, including strong relationships, supportive environments (including carefully planned transitions, schedules, and grouping), and teaching social–emotional skills to children.

• Provide professional development opportunities to staff and resources to families on the use of strategies to respond to challenging behaviors, including support from behavioral or developmental specialists, early interventionists, and mental-health professionals as necessary.[3]

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a natural part of social interactions. Teachers can help children navigate conflict successfully by facilitating conflict resolution. Teachers should:

• Support children in expressing their emotions and negotiating conflict in developmentally appropriate ways.
• Model appropriate behavior for resolving conflicts.
• Refine and implement developmentally appropriate strategies to help children learn how to express emotions, negotiate conflict, and solve problems.
• Work with coworkers to utilize a similar and consistent process with children in the same classroom or environment.
• Engage colleagues and other program staff, children, and families in discussions around conflict resolution.[4]

[5]

Include the children directly involved and use these steps

1. Acknowledge there is a problem or conflict: What happened? How do you feel?
   • ü Approach children calmly, take deep breaths, and acknowledge feelings
   • ü Ask what happened and how do you feel?; hear from both children. This is about listening to each other

2. Ask for solution ideas
   • ü See if the children have ideas first
   • ü Get a "solution kit" if needed

3. Give it a try
   • ü Get the children to signal agreement: thumbs up, hand shake
   • ü You can state the solution again if needed and provide PDA (Positive, Descriptive Acknowledgment) for being flexible, being good at solving problems, asking for help, staying calm

4. Follow up with children, use PDA (Positive, Descriptive Acknowledgment)

It’s important to see that the issue is resolved or that the children move on.
The Teaching Pyramid

Challenging behavior often indicates that a child is experiencing stress from a number of factors: internal stress from fatigue, poor nutrition, illness, pain or discomfort; external stress from a mismatch in the classroom environment or expectations, poor relationships with the teachers or children, overly difficult or overly simple tasks, limited social skills, trauma in the home environment; or a combination of these factors. A consistent and supportive teacher or other important adult can provide support for the child during short periods of stress. If challenging behavior continues over longer periods of time, it may be necessary to examine possible contributors to the behavior in the classroom and from other sources. A tiered intervention framework such as the Teaching Pyramid may be an appropriate response to challenging behavior.

The teaching pyramid model (Fox et al. 2003) describes a primary level of universal practices—classroom preventive practices that promote the social and emotional development of all children built on a foundation of positive relationships; secondary interventions that address specific social and emotional learning needs of children at risk for challenging behavior; and development of individualized interventions (tertiary level) for children with persistent problem behavior (see the diagram “The Teaching Pyramid”).[6]

Universal classroom practices include developmentally appropriate, child-centered classroom environments that promote children’s developing independence, successful interactions, and engagement in learning. While universal practices may be enough to promote the development of social competence in the majority of children in the classroom, teachers may find that there are children whose lack of social and emotional skills or whose challenging behavior requires more focused attention.

According to the California Collaborative on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CA CSEFEL), fundamental to promoting social and emotional competence in young children is guiding children in their efforts to build positive relationships with adults and peers and creating supportive social and emotional learning environments for all children. For children at risk of developing behavior problems, targeted social and emotional strategies may be necessary, and for those children who display very persistent and severe challenging and behavior problems, individualized intensive interventions are required, when the children do not respond to typical preventive practices, child guidance procedures, or social–emotional teaching strategies that would normally work with most children (CA CSEFEL
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Way</th>
<th>New Way</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General intervention for all behavior problems</td>
<td>Intervention matched to purpose of the behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention is reactive</td>
<td>Intervention is proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on behavior reduction</td>
<td>Focus on teaching the child new skills</td>
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<td>Quick fix</td>
<td>Long-term interventions</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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